



# NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



Contact: Brian Gorman  
206-526-6613

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
July 28, 2009

## **Fisheries Service Proposes New Rules to Safeguard Puget Sound's Killer Whales** *Endangered Whales Could Be Given Wider Berth, Safety Zone*

NOAA's Fisheries Service is proposing new rules on vessel traffic aimed at further protecting Southern Resident killer whales in Washington's Puget Sound. These large marine mammals, the subject of intense curiosity from kayakers to tourists crowding the decks of commercial whale-watching vessels, were added to the Endangered Species list in late 2005.

The proposed rules would prohibit vessels from approaching any killer whale closer than 200 yards and forbid vessels from intercepting or parking in the path of a whale. In addition, the proposed regulations would set up a half-mile-wide no-go zone along the west side of San Juan Island from May 1 through the end of September where generally no vessels would be allowed.

"The idea here is to give these remarkable animals even more real, meaningful protection," said Barry Thom, acting head of the agency's Northwest regional office. "Without it, we would undercut the hard work we are all doing to recover the species by improving the sound's water quality and recovering salmon, the killer whale's primary food."

The fisheries agency said there would be exemptions to the rules for some vessels, including those actively fishing commercially, cargo vessels travelling in established shipping lanes, and government and research vessels. The no-go zone would also have limited exceptions for land owners accessing private property adjacent to it.

While Southern Resident whales are also threatened by degraded water quality in the sound and lack of prey, primarily salmon, biologists have known for years that vessel traffic may be tied to their low numbers.

The whales, which depend on their highly sophisticated sonar to navigate and find food, can be affected by underwater noise from boats and disturbed by vessels that approach too close or block their paths. The population peaked at 97 animals in the 1990s and then declined to 79 in 2001. It currently stands at 85 whales. The agency's recovery plan, released in early 2008, calls for actions to reduce disturbance from vessels.

If adopted, the earliest the rule would take effect would be May 2010. The agency said it will hold public meetings Sept. 30 in Seattle and Oct. 5 in Friday Harbor for people to learn more about the proposed rules. The public comment period on them closes Oct. 27.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.

On the Web:

Proposed regulation and comments: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Whales-Dolphins-Porpoise/Killer-Whales/ESA-Status/Orca-Vessel-Regs.cfm>